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AHR Roundtable

National Socialism and the End of Modernity

MARK ROSEMAN

NAZISM PROVIDES AN INTERESTING TEST CASE with which to evaluate modernity's utility as concept and historical lens. More than most other recent historical phenomena and issues, the Third Reich has provoked intense scrutiny of its relationship to the modern world.¹ Since the 1930s, analysts have wondered whether Nazism represented a throwback to a barbaric past or rather exemplified the worst of modernity, reflections that have continued up to the present, including a series of debates conducted since the 1980s in the wake of the loss of faith in modernization theory.² A well-established narrative, in vogue in the 1960s and 1970s, of Nazism as the product of uneven development and of its exponents as searchers for a mythical past gave way to a recognition that in its roots and impulses Nazism drew on and expressed recognizable and widespread modern developments. Ever since then, the disturbing evidence of the Nazis' contemporaneity has both reflected and influenced our thinking about modernity.³ Yet while the Nazis cannot be explained away by reference to some kind of special departure from the modern world, the concept of modernity has proven surprisingly unhelpful as diagnosis and explanation. The problem is partly our lack of clarity about what modernity means, partly that in rejecting older modernization theories' normative assumptions we have often produced a new moralizing counter-narrative about modernity's "fatal potential," and partly that the Nazis

I am grateful to the anonymous readers for the *AHR* and particularly to Donald Bloxham for their comments.

¹ For earlier reviews of these debates, see Norbert Frei, "Wie modern war der Nationalsozialismus?" *Geschichte und Gesellschaft* 19, no. 3 (1993): 367–387; Mark Roseman, "National Socialism and Modernisation," in Richard Bessel, ed., *Fascist Italy and Nazi Germany: Comparisons and Contrasts* (Cambridge, 1996), 197–229; Riccardo Bavaj, *Die Ambivalenz der Moderne im Nationalsozialismus: Eine Bilanz der Forschung* (Munich, 2003).

² Earlier luminaries making important statements about Nazism's modernity (or anti-modernity) include Ernst Bloch, "Amusement Co., Grauen, Drittes Reich" (1930), in Bloch, *Erbschaft dieser Zeit, Gesamtausgabe IV* (1935; repr., Frankfurt, 1977), 61–69; Eric Voegelin, *Die politischen Religionen* (Vienna, 1938); Ernst Fraenkel, *The Dual State: A Contribution to the Theory of Dictatorship*, trans. E. A. Shils, in collaboration with Edith Lowenstein and Klaus Knorr (New York, 1941); Walter Benjamin, "Theses on the Philosophy of History" (1940), in Benjamin, *Illuminations* (New York, 1969), 255–266; Max Horkheimer and Theodor W. Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment* (New York, 1972). The most recent major study on Nazism and modernity is Roger Griffin, *Modernism and Fascism: The Sense of a Beginning under Mussolini and Hitler* (Basingstoke, 2007).

³ For an intelligent account of the links between attitudes to Nazism and the Holocaust and views of modernity, see Eric L. Santner, *Stranded Objects: Mourning, Memory, and Film in Postwar Germany* (Ithaca, N.Y., 1990).

were a product far more of their particular epoch than of a generic modern.⁴ This, in turn, is an indicator less of Nazi specialness per se than of the fact that the basic ingredients of modernity allow for such massively varying societal outcomes and such huge differences between successive epochs as to give modernity very little explanatory power.

For the modernization theories of the 1950s, Nazism was something of a provocation, since it was industrially modern but neither pluralistic nor benign.⁵ Whereas Stalinism and to a certain extent Italian fascism could be explained as developmental dictatorships, Nazism—despite the efforts of some authors—did not easily fit into this pattern.⁶ Instead, it proved easier to read as development gone wrong, a sign that the interlocking mechanisms that made up the modernization syndrome could get horribly out of sync. In the model of the German special path, or *Sonderweg*, feudal elites were seen as having manipulated the political system, substituting chauvinistic and radical ideologies for genuine representation, and allowing an irrational and anti-modern movement to emerge and eventually gain political power.⁷ Much of this theorizing related to German society before 1933; Nazi Germany was the vanishing point for accounts of Germany's special path rather than the principal site at which the application of modernization theory took place.⁸ However, some au-

⁴ On the reification of the modern period, see also Carol Symes's essay in this forum.

⁵ On the bewildering variety of modernization theories, see Dean C. Tipps, "Modernization Theory and the Comparative Study of Societies: A Critical Perspective," *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 15, no. 2 (1973): 199–226.

⁶ David E. Apter, *The Politics of Modernization* (Chicago, 1965); C. E. Black, *The Dynamics of Modernization: A Study in Comparative History* (New York, 1966); A. F. K. Organski, *The Stages of Political Development* (New York, 1965).

⁷ Heinrich August Winkler, "German Society, Hitler, and the Illusion of Restoration," *Journal of Contemporary History* 11, no. 1 (1976): 1–16; Seymour Martin Lipset, *Political Man: The Social Bases of Politics* (New York, 1960); Bernd Weisbrod, *Schwerindustrie in der Weimarer Republik: Interessenpolitik zwischen Stabilisierung und Krise* (Wuppertal, 1978). On Nazis' anti-modernity, see Henry Ashby Turner, *Faschismus und Kapitalismus in Deutschland: Studien zum Verhältnis zwischen Nationalsozialismus und Wirtschaft* (Göttingen, 1972), 162.

⁸ Helmut Walser Smith has eloquently drawn our attention to the way the "vanishing point" of 1933 long absorbed historians' attention, to the detriment of 1941. Smith, *The Continuities of German History: Nation, Religion, and Race across the Long Nineteenth Century* (Cambridge, 2008), 13. The focus of *Sonderweg* theory on the period before 1933, rather than Nazi rule itself, can be explained above all by the fact that it seemed that Nazi Germany eventually alienated or abandoned many of those groups most interested in some kind of restoration; Nazi policy was therefore seen as an irrational ideology that had detached itself from its societal roots and run amok. Thus, while modernization theory provided the essential backbone to the arguments about German society before 1933, the big debates in the 1960s and 1970s about the Nazi period itself often only implicitly made reference to modernization. The two sides of the intentionalist-functionalist debate shared the view of the regime's essential irrationality, but they differed in their assessment of how it worked. For both, the role of the charismatic leader was important, but whereas the intentionalists emphasized Hitler's agency and assumed that mechanisms of obedience and fear sufficed to ensure the implementation of his agenda, the functionalists saw charisma as the glue that held together an otherwise unstable and dynamic set of competing agencies, and attributed to the irrationality of this power structure the dynamic that drove the regime forward to destruction. This kind of structural-functional analysis clearly operated with notions of the rationality of modern governance similar to those held by modernization theorists, but it rested in this case not directly on a belief in the necessity of pluralism as a recipe for balanced modernization but rather on a Weberian analysis of the charismatic rule that was at the heart of the regime. By melding charismatic and bureaucratic rule, the Nazis both incorporated and opposed principles of rational government. See Hans Mommsen, "Die Realisierung des Utopischen: Die 'Endlösung der Judenfrage' im 'Dritten Reich,'" *Geschichte und Gesellschaft* 9, no. 3 (1983): 381–420; Martin Broszat, *Der Staat Hitlers: Grundlegung und Entwicklung seiner inneren Verfassung* (Munich, 1969); Mark Roseman, "Beyond Conviction? Perpetrators, Ideas, and Action in the Holocaust in Historiographical Perspective," in Frank Biess, Mark

thors used modernization theory to attribute the regime's dysfunctional character to its lack of pluralism and rational structures.⁹ Because it was clear that the regime had nevertheless made substantial use of modern technology, it was seen as exemplifying a kind of reactionary modernism.¹⁰

As modernization theory in general became discredited, so the *Sonderweg* approach in German history came under attack—particularly in its view of the limits to bourgeois influence and its emphasis on the power and influence of feudal groups.¹¹ The spread of new kinds of right-wing politics in Wilhelmine Germany, for example, was now no longer attributed to continuing feudal influence, but rather was seen as a bourgeois response to the challenge to its leadership posed by the emergence of mass politics at a time of rapid change.¹² This, in turn, encouraged new ways of thinking about Nazism's roots and goals. Since the appearance of Detlev Peukert's book *Volksgenossen und Gemeinschaftsfremde* in 1982, most references to modernity in work on Nazism have underlined the ways in which Nazism exemplified features of modernity or was born of a thoroughly modern crisis.¹³ From being an aberration from modernization, Nazism had become the quintessential manifestation of modernity.

Once the lens of classical modernization theory was cast aside, it became clear that Nazi electoral support did not come from marginal, backwards-oriented groups and that the Nazis were not promising or seeking to escape from the framework of an industrial society.¹⁴ To be sure, the Nazis, like their fascist counterparts in Italy, prized the racial value of yeoman rural stock, but this was a common trope of con-

Roseman, and Hanna Schissler, eds., *Conflict, Catastrophe and Continuity: Essays on Modern German History* (New York, 2007), 83–103.

⁹ Horst Matzerath and Heinrich Volkmann, "Modernisierungstheorie und Nationalsozialismus," in Jürgen Kocka, ed., *Theorien in der Praxis des Historikers* (Göttingen, 1977), 86–102 (with discussion of the piece by other historians, 102–116).

¹⁰ Jeffrey Herf, *Reactionary Modernism: Technology, Culture, and Politics in Weimar and the Third Reich* (Cambridge, 1984). Ralf Dahrendorf and David Schoenbaum argued that the contradiction between reactionary aims and modern means led in the end to the unwitting modernization of German society, as the Nazis' totalitarian aspirations led them to destroy their authoritarian roots. Dahrendorf, *Gesellschaft und Demokratie in Deutschland* (Munich, 1965); Schoenbaum, *Hitler's Social Revolution: Class and Status in Nazi Germany, 1933–1939* (Garden City, N.Y., 1966). On the differences between them, see Roseman, "National Socialism and Modernisation."

¹¹ For the connections between modernization theory and German history, see Hans-Ulrich Wehler, *Modernisierungstheorie und Geschichte* (Göttingen, 1975). For the *Sonderweg* critique, see David Blackbourn and Geoff Eley, *The Peculiarities of German History: Bourgeois Society and Politics in Nineteenth-Century Germany* (Oxford, 1984). Modernization theory has recently made a comeback in some branches of political science. It still has difficulty contending with Nazi Germany, however. See Ronald Inglehart and Christian Welzel, *Modernization, Cultural Change, and Democracy: The Human Development Sequence* (New York, 2005), 161–166.

¹² Geoff Eley, *Reshaping the German Right: Radical Nationalism and Political Change after Bismarck* (New Haven, Conn., 1980).

¹³ Detlev J. K. Peukert, *Volksgenossen und Gemeinschaftsfremde: Anpassung, Ausmerze und Aufbegehren unter dem Nationalsozialismus* (Cologne, 1982); published in English as *Inside Nazi Germany: Conformity, Opposition, and Racism in Everyday Life*, trans. Richard Deveson (New Haven, Conn., 1987).

¹⁴ Jürgen W. Falter, *Hitlers Wähler* (Munich, 1991); Thomas Childers, *The Nazi Voter: The Social Foundations of Fascism in Germany, 1919–1933* (Chapel Hill, N.C., 1983); Peter Fritzsche, *Rehearsals for Fascism: Populism and Political Mobilization in Weimar Germany* (New York, 1990); Monika Renneberg and Mark Walker, "Scientists, Engineers and National Socialism," in Renneberg and Walker, eds., *Science, Technology, and National Socialism* (Cambridge, 1994), 1–29.

temporary racial theory, and certainly no effort to turn back the clock.¹⁵ Hitler himself was impatient with attacks on big business for the sake of the small man.¹⁶ Industrial strength, affluent consumers, rural racial virtues, a vast tame agricultural hinterland—all of these belonged to his notion of the Germany of the future.¹⁷ Moreover, it also became clear that the early post-1945 decades had seen the suppression of many aspects of other contemporary societies that would have suggested that Nazism was in tune with contemporary trends.¹⁸ Nowhere was this more evident than in the way that knowledge of the global support for Social Darwinism and eugenics was suppressed in the wake of revelations about Nazism.¹⁹ In the era of classical modernization theory, Nazism thus looked more like an aberration than it should have. Finally, though this remains more contentious, it was far from clear that Nazism had proven so dysfunctional, in the sense either that popular discontent had forced it into war or that the regime's trajectory was the product of uncontrolled radicalization.

IF NEITHER THE NAZIS NOR many of their supporters were looking backward (except in the sense that all nationalists call on past myths and symbols), what did it mean to say that they were modern? Did it mean that the regime largely resembled its contemporaries, and the Third Reich was following or mirroring trends of neighboring societies? Was the point rather that its profile was distinctive but nonetheless made of modern clay? Or was it recognizably modern only in its point of departure—a thoroughly modern crisis—but with a subsequent trajectory that was *sui generis*? The striking variation in answers to these questions is not surprising on one level, given the hideous juxtapositions the Nazi regime has to offer, but on another it reveals the very considerable uncertainties as to what exactly modernity is and what it looks like.

We can see this uncertainty in the terminology itself. Although “modernity” and “the modern” have emerged as the most influential concepts, “modernization”—admittedly different in its implications from older theories—has nevertheless retained an important place.²⁰ A small number of influential pieces have tried “mod-

¹⁵ Rainer Zitelmann, *Hitler, Selbstverständnis eines Revolutionärs* (Stuttgart, 1990).

¹⁶ For an outstanding account of Nazi economic thinking, see Adam Tooze, *The Wages of Destruction: The Making and Breaking of the Nazi Economy* (London, 2006). See also Griffin, *Modernism and Fascism*, 314.

¹⁷ See also Jill Stephenson, *Hitler's Home Front: Württemberg under the Nazis* (London, 2006).

¹⁸ Jean-François Lyotard argued that the forty-year-long postwar desire to safeguard the “modern project” had led to the reality of Nazism being hidden. Lyotard, “Ticket to a New Decor,” trans. Brian Massumi and W. G. J. Niesluchowski, *Copywright*, no. 1 (1987): 14–15, <http://www.egs.edu/faculty/jean-francois-lyotard/articles/ticket-to-a-new-decor/>.

¹⁹ In 1945, the *Encyclopedia Britannica* quietly euthanized its former entry for “Civilization,” which since the 1910 edition had declared that the future of humanity would probably be ruled by the “biological improvement of the race” and by man applying “whatever laws of heredity he knows or may acquire in the interests of his own species, as he has long applied them in the case of domesticated animals.” Enzo Traverso, *The Origins of Nazi Violence* (New York, 2003), 122–123. The 1911 edition can be found online: <http://www.1911encyclopedia.org/Civilization>.

²⁰ Thomas Mergel notes the shift from modernization to modernity, but he wrote too early to see the more recent work on modernism. Mergel, “Geht es weiterhin voran? Die Modernisierungstheorie auf dem Weg zu einer Theorie der Moderne,” in Thomas Mergel and Thomas Welskopp, eds., *Geschichte zwischen Kultur und Gesellschaft: Beiträge zur Theoriedebatte* (Munich, 1997), 203–232. On the extensive

ernism” on for size as a substitute for both terms.²¹ Should modernity be understood as a set of common processes, albeit ones without the benign political associations they used to have? If so, the concept of modernization continues to be useful. If modernity is better conceptualized as a set of potentials or propensities, then “modernity” itself may be the preferred term.²² Or should we be thinking rather of a state of mind or a claim made at various points in history—the kind of claim that, as Frederick Cooper put it, justified colonization—or perhaps the kind of dream of the future that encouraged dazzling new city visions?²³ If so, we may be moving into the territory of modernism.²⁴ These different usages map onto different ways of conceptualizing Nazism’s relationship to the modern world. For example, “modernization” tends to be deployed for arguments that Nazism responded to social problems or pursued policies that were similar to those of neighboring societies.²⁵ Modernity and modernism, by contrast, tend to be preferred in work that foregrounds the distinctiveness of Nazi goals and actions but diagnoses some underlying potential in modern society to which Nazism gave disturbing expression.²⁶ In short, the conceptual terrain reveals the plasticity in conceptualizations both of the modern world and of the Nazis’ connection to it.

A glance at recent work on the Nazis as modernizers also reveals how difficult it has proved to classify social change since the signposts offered by the classical theories of modernization were dismantled. The most sophisticated efforts have come from Michael Prinz and Rainer Zitelmann, who saw Nazism as responding to the same challenges of renewal and development facing other industrial societies at the time of the world economic crisis.²⁷ Alongside their work, other authors claimed that the Nazis were offering innovative solutions to the economic crisis as “Keynesians before Keynes,” or noted among other things the moves by the German Labor Front to promote productivity and the rational use of labor or to remove the status barriers between blue- and white-collar workers in pursuit of a mobile and motivated workforce.²⁸ In 1933, Germany clearly did not stop being part of a transatlantic con-

continued use of modernization as concept, see Bavaj, *Die Ambivalenz der Moderne im Nationalsozialismus*.

²¹ Most notably Peter Fritzsche, “Nazi Modern,” *Modernism/Modernity* 3, no. 1 (1996): 1–22; Griffin, *Modernism and Fascism*.

²² For example, Zygmunt Bauman, *Modernity and the Holocaust* (Ithaca, N.Y., 1989).

²³ On the visions behind colonization, see Frederick Cooper, “Modernity,” in Cooper, ed., *Colonialism in Question: Theory, Knowledge, History* (Berkeley, Calif., 2005), 113–117. On city visions, see Richard Dennis, *Cities in Modernity: Representations and Productions of Metropolitan Space, 1840–1930* (Cambridge, 2008).

²⁴ On the complex relationship between modernity and modernism, see Robin W. Winks and Joan Neuberger, *Europe and the Making of Modernity, 1815–1914* (Oxford, 2005), 309–310.

²⁵ See, for example, Michael Prinz and Rainer Zitelmann, *Nationalsozialismus und Modernisierung* (Darmstadt, 1991).

²⁶ As in studies by Peukert, Bauman, and other scholars explored below.

²⁷ Prinz and Zitelmann, *Nationalsozialismus und Modernisierung*; Zitelmann, *Hitler, Selbstverständnis eines Revolutionärs*; Uwe Backes, Eckhard Jesse, and Rainer Zitelmann, *Die Schatten der Vergangenheit: Impulse zur Historisierung des Nationalsozialismus* (Berlin, 1990).

²⁸ Albrecht Ritschl, “Zum Verhältnis von Markt und Staat in Hitlers Weltbild: Überlegungen zu einer Forschungskontroverse,” in Backes, Jesse, and Zitelmann, *Die Schatten der Vergangenheit*, 243–265; Werner Abelshauser and Anselm Faust, *Wirtschafts- und Sozialpolitik: Eine nationalsozialistische Sozialrevolution?* (Tübingen, 1983). Michael Prinz was influential here, too; Prinz, *Vom neuen Mittelstand zum Volksgenossen: Die Entwicklung des sozialen Status der Angestellten von der Weimarer Republik bis zum Ende der NS-Zeit* (Munich, 1986). See also Tilla Siegel, “Rationalisierung statt Klassenkampf: Zur

versation about rationalization and effective man-management. Even within the SS, the men of the Business Administration Main Office combined a strong belief in the regime's priorities with a commitment to efficiency and modern management.²⁹

Yet given the obvious political differences between Nazism and other major industrial powers, it is clear that Nazi modernization cannot be subsumed under the classic notion of an interlocking syndrome, in which a given set of economic, social, and political developments necessarily fit together in a standard pattern. Some authors tried to address this with talk of "partial modernization," but then there was no longer a coherent sense of which developments were necessary or how they were functionally interrelated.³⁰ Classical theories had a clear measure of successful modernization, namely the development of pluralism and democracy, but the measure of modernity for newer work was much less obvious. It was reasonable for Prinz to claim that we should not write off the Nazis' deprofessionalization of welfare through the winter-help scheme as anti-modern, given the cyclical nature of governmental initiatives in the modern era more generally, or for other authors to identify the modern elements in Nazi agrarian and environmental policies.³¹ As long as the claim that the Nazis were willing modernizers is merely reactive, offering a critique of earlier modernization theory, it has traction: we can agree that, say, pro-agricultural policies are not necessarily a sign of romantic anti-modernism. But the challenge then is to identify—particularly in the short to medium term—what policy trend would definitively *not* count as modernization.

Then again, no one was claiming the Holocaust as modernization or arguing that a Germany that had carried out the mass murder of part of its population had thereby been modernized. Unlike the older literature, the newer work thus had no ready-made way of explaining the Nazis' exceptionality. At times the foregrounding of consumer dreams and the forgetting of mass murder seemed almost distasteful.³²

THE MOST INFLUENTIAL CONCLUSIONS about Nazism and modernity thus have not come from studies that focused on modernization as a set of "secular" processes but can rather be found in work from the Frankfurt School, through Detlev Peukert to Zygmunt Bauman and Giorgio Agamben, identifying essential connections between Nazism's most striking and disturbing features and "modernity," here understood as a set of potentials or inherent impulses.³³ Influenced by Michel Foucault, historians have been increasingly aware of the repertoire of biopolitics that emerged in the

Rolle der Deutschen Arbeitsfront in der nationalsozialistischen Ordnung der Arbeit," in Hans Mommsen and Susanne Willems, eds., *Herrschaftsalltag im Dritten Reich: Studien und Texte* (Düsseldorf, 1988), 97–143.

²⁹ Michael Thad Allen, *The Business of Genocide: The SS, Slave Labor, and the Concentration Camps* (Chapel Hill, N.C., 2002).

³⁰ Wolfgang Zollitsch, *Arbeiter zwischen Weltwirtschaftskrise und Nationalsozialismus: Ein Beitrag zur Sozialgeschichte der Jahre 1928 bis 1936* (Göttingen, 1990), 241.

³¹ Michael Prinz, "Die soziale Funktion moderner Elemente in der Gesellschaftspolitik des Nationalsozialismus," in Michael Prinz and Rainer Zitelmann, eds., *Nationalsozialismus und Modernisierung* (Darmstadt, 1991), 297–327; Rainer Zitelmann, "Die totalitäre Seite der Moderne," *ibid.*, 1–20.

³² See Norbert Frei's review of Zitelmann's work in Frei, "Wie modern war der Nationalsozialismus?," 383.

³³ Horkheimer and Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*; among other titles, Detlev J. K. Peukert, *Max*

eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, and of eugenics' growing influence in the twentieth-century United States and Europe.³⁴ Within Germany, eugenics had by the 1920s become a staple element in much social and medical policy discourse.³⁵ This biopolitics involved not just state ambition, but the increasing role of scientific knowledge (or at least knowledge that claimed scientific status) and specialist elites in shaping policy and discourse.³⁶ A second, related argument has linked the Nazis' embrace of selective racial engineering to the crisis of the welfare state. For Peukert, Germany was particularly vulnerable to calls for selective engineering because its advanced welfare state created ambitions and expectations that were not likely to survive economic crisis.³⁷ While Nazi antisemitism cannot be subsumed under quite the same narrative of efficiency and selectivity, here too there have been important arguments about the function and logic of murder in the context of Nazi imperial expansion.³⁸ At the broadest level, Bauman has argued that the Holocaust continued in relatively pure form—since territory and national competition were not at stake—a modern “garden culture,” in which the state seeks to weed out the unfit and create a pure society. Giorgio Agamben and Enzo Traverso have placed Nazi violence in a similarly comprehensive setting of modern bioengineering.³⁹

Yet if we glance at the question of eugenics again for a moment, it is clear that precedents and parallels are not so clear-cut. Eugenics before 1933 came in a variety of forms, all of them freighted with potentially dangerous notions of heredity, but linked to political solutions, many of which were strikingly ameliorative and progressive.⁴⁰ Edward Ross Dickinson has reminded us also of eugenics' striking lack of political clout in the Weimar years, despite its discursive presence.⁴¹ If it is true that there were professionals who advocated “mercy killing” of useless individuals well before Hitler was on the political scene, it is also true that the majority of the

Webers *Diagnose der Moderne* (Göttingen, 1989); Zygmunt Bauman, *Modernity and the Holocaust* (Ithaca, N.Y., 1989); Giorgio Agamben, *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life* (Stanford, Calif., 1998).

³⁴ Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality*, vol. 1: *An Introduction*, trans. Robert Hurley (London, 1979); Martin Shaw, “Sociology and Genocide,” in Donald Bloxham and A. Dirk Moses, eds., *The Oxford Handbook of Genocide Studies* (New York, 2010), 150.

³⁵ Paul Weindling, *Health, Race and German Politics between National Unification and Nazism, 1870–1945* (Cambridge, 1993); Gisela Bock, *Zwangssterilisation im Nationalsozialismus: Studien zur Rassenpolitik und Frauenpolitik* (Opladen, 1986); Cornelia Osborne, *The Politics of the Body in Weimar Germany: Women's Reproductive Rights and Duties* (Ann Arbor, Mich., 1992).

³⁶ Ernst Klee, “Euthanasie” im NS-Staat: Die “Vernichtung lebensunwerten Lebens” (Frankfurt am Main, 1983).

³⁷ Detlev J. K. Peukert, *The Weimar Republic: The Crisis of Classical Modernity* (London, 1991).

³⁸ Among many others, Götz Aly and Susanne Heim, *Vordenker der Vernichtung: Auschwitz und die deutschen Pläne für eine neue europäische Ordnung* (Hamburg, 1991); Christian Gerlach, *Kalkulierte Morde: Die deutsche Wirtschafts- und Vernichtungspolitik in Weissrussland 1941 bis 1944* (Hamburg, 1999); Christian Gerlach and Götz Aly, *Das letzte Kapitel: Realpolitik, Ideologie und der Mord an den ungarischen Juden 1944/1945* (Stuttgart, 2002).

³⁹ Bauman, *Modernity and the Holocaust*, 83; Agamben, *Homo Sacer*; Traverso, *The Origins of Nazi Violence*.

⁴⁰ See, to take one example, the important recent work on Charlotte Perkins Gilman, which recognizes her eugenics for what it is—significant but shaped by a series of liberal and feminist assumptions. Judith A. Allen, *The Feminism of Charlotte Perkins Gilman: Sexualities, Histories, Progressivism* (Chicago, 2009), esp. 321–323.

⁴¹ Edward Ross Dickinson, “Biopolitics, Fascism, Democracy: Some Reflections on Our Discourse about ‘Modernity,’” *Central European History* 37, no. 1 (2004): 1–48.

profession was still opposed to such measures.⁴² Moreover, the Nazis' central concept of the ethnic-racial *Volksgemeinschaft* radically altered the balance between individual and collective rights contained in Weimar's version of the social contract.⁴³ Neither in Germany nor elsewhere can 1920s welfare policy be restricted to its disciplinary aspects. The impetus was as much about inclusion, protection, and rights.⁴⁴ Once we reflect on the open-ended character of Weimar's social policy, we see a more general problem with the way that characterizations of modernity are overly narrowly tailored to explaining the Nazi case.⁴⁵ It is certainly easier for the Nazis to be seen as "modern" if we forget about all those elements of modernity that they did not exemplify.⁴⁶

If one weakness of the modernity argument is thus that lines of continuity have been established too hastily, another is the misplaced emphasis on the role and power of reason. The ideologies and energies on which the Nazis drew often had little to do with rationality. It is clear that they were inspired by and gained traction from the reaction against rationalization as much as they sought to implement social rationalization.⁴⁷ Again, if we remain with biopolitics for a moment, we can say that certainly, many scientific disciplines adapted and prospered under Nazism; knowledge was gained and effectively deployed. But in the biosciences, political pressure and ambitious opportunism often allowed the agenda to be driven from outside the realm of scientific knowledge.⁴⁸ It was widely known within the ministries dealing with racial matters that there was little evidence for the regime's claims about race. Even core players such as Walter Gross were, as Claudia Koonz has noted, unsure of race's real existence.⁴⁹ Moreover, antisemitism's power and centrality made little sense in conventional calculations of social welfare or economic efficiency. The instrumental arguments deployed were strikingly versatile, and thus clearly secondary.⁵⁰ Hitler himself later acknowledged that the Jews were not a race, although this dismantling of the ostensible logic of extermination did not mean that he had abandoned his belief in their world-destructive role.⁵¹ Overall, whether we look at Hitler's

⁴² Michael Burleigh, *Death and Deliverance: "Euthanasia" in Germany, c. 1900–1945* (Cambridge, 1994), 38–39.

⁴³ A more empowering relationship between individual and collective had been at the heart of so much that was modern in Germany, so the radical break from the process of individualization needs closer attention. Ute Daniel, "'Kultur' und 'Gesellschaft': Überlegungen zum Gegenstandsbereich der Sozialgeschichte," *Geschichte und Gesellschaft* 19, no. 1 (1993): 69–99.

⁴⁴ Young-Sun Hong, *Welfare, Modernity, and the Weimar State, 1919–1933* (Princeton, N.J., 1998).

⁴⁵ See also Julia Roos, *Weimar through the Lens of Gender: Prostitution Reform, Woman's Emancipation, and German Democracy, 1919–33* (Ann Arbor, Mich., 2010).

⁴⁶ For example, in so many other historical contexts, modernity as a concept is seen as integrally involving individualism, be it in cultural expression, in discussion of political rights, or in the formation of public and private identities. See Winks and Neuberger, *Europe and the Making of Modernity*, 3; or the suggestive comments in Michael P. Steinberg, *Judaism Musical and Unmusical* (Chicago, 2007), 6–10; and Dipesh Chakrabarty's essay in this forum.

⁴⁷ Mary Nolan, *Visions of Modernity: American Business and the Modernization of Germany* (New York, 1994).

⁴⁸ Michael Burleigh is particularly good on the mixture of adaptation, opportunism, political pressure, and personnel change; Burleigh, "Hope and Hard Times: Asylums in the 1930s," in Burleigh, *Death and Deliverance*, 43–90.

⁴⁹ Claudia Koonz, *The Nazi Conscience* (Harvard, Mass., 2003), 115, 28, 175.

⁵⁰ See Mark Roseman, "Ideas, Contexts and the Pursuit of Genocide," *Bulletin of the German Historical Institute*, London 25, no. 1 (May 2003): 64–87; reprinted in Jeremy Black, ed., *The Second World War*, vol. 5: *The Holocaust* (Aldershot, 2007), 1–25.

⁵¹ See Adolf Hitler and Martin Bormann, *Hitlers politisches Testament: Die Bormann Diktate vom*

dreams of expansionism, at the clear evidence to informed insiders from December 1941 onward that Germany could not win the war, or at the mayhem that Germany unleashed on others and itself, we are tempted to follow Ronald Aronson in talking of societal madness at least as much as we are inclined to emphasize the Nazis' rationality.⁵² It certainly seems inappropriate to seek the genesis of the Holocaust in the "spirit of science."⁵³ As Michael Mann, Donald Bloxham, and others have shown, murderous population policies in the modern period were often pursued by nations thinking nationally, without any clear biologization of their identity, beyond, perhaps, some strong narrative of descent or diffuse organicist nationalism.⁵⁴ "As a legitimation for genocide," writes Bloxham, "biological racism is only at the extreme of a continuum of exclusionary beliefs that have the potential to attribute malign characteristics to all members of another group."⁵⁵

Another important part of Bauman's account of the "gardener state" concerned the rationality and purposefulness of the tools with which it sought to clear out the weeds. Yet looking at the power and energy of Nazi bureaucracy, we are struck less by the rational power of bureaucracy per se than by the distinctive forces that gave it energy.⁵⁶ The pressure and competition provided by the mass party was crucial. In the Jewish question above all, but also in other facets of racial policy, the civil service was repeatedly chivied and radicalized by grassroots pressure.⁵⁷ Meanwhile, at a higher level, and particularly once the Nazis began to create new organizations in the occupied East, the dynamizing effect of competition for power in unregulated institutional space, conjoined with the *völkisch* ethos of a generation of ambitious younger staff, unleashed new energy.⁵⁸ Nazi mass shootings in the East recall other, more primitive genocides rather than a hyper-efficient modern state.⁵⁹ Paradoxically, Bauman's argument about the distinctive efficiency and calculus of the gardener

Februar und April 1945 (Hamburg, 1981), 68–69, cited in Richard Steigmann-Gall, "Aryan and Semite, Christ and Antichrist: Rethinking Religion and Modernity in Nazi Antisemitism" (paper presented at "Rethinking German Modernity" Conference, Toronto, 2005).

⁵² Tooze, *The Wages of Destruction*, 506–508; Ronald Aronson, "Social Madness," in Isidor Wallimann, Michael N. Dobkowski, and Richard L. Rubenstein, eds., *Genocide and the Modern Age: Etiology and Case Studies of Mass Death* (Syracuse, N.Y., 2000), 125–161; Aronson, *Technological Madness: Towards a Theory of the Impending Nuclear Holocaust* (London, 1983).

⁵³ Detlev J. K. Peukert, "The Genesis of the 'Final Solution' from the Spirit of Science," in David F. Crew, ed., *Nazism and German Society, 1933–1945* (London, 1994), 234–252.

⁵⁴ Michael Mann, *The Dark Side of Democracy: Explaining Ethnic Cleansing* (New York, 2005), 61–68.

⁵⁵ Donald Bloxham, *The Final Solution: A Genocide* (Oxford, 2009), 6.

⁵⁶ The argument that the division of labor enabled detachment from murderous decision-making, for example, is true only as a postwar legal defense. During the war itself, the protagonists claimed ownership—and indeed historians trying to unravel the chain of decision-making often face the reverse problem—namely, that participants in the final solution, be it a Heydrich, a Greiser, or an Eichmann, claimed more, not less, authorship than was warranted. Moreover, these were not desk murderers shielded from the reality of their actions. A staple element of SS leadership style was to visit the killing sites repeatedly. Himmler's key decisions were most often made after the latest visit to the bloodbath. Mid-ranking Gestapo and SD operatives circulated between desk jobs and field jobs throughout the war. See Roseman, "Beyond Conviction?"

⁵⁷ On the role of popular forces in pushing the Jewish agenda, see Michael Wildt, *Volksgemeinschaft als Selbstermächtigung: Gewalt gegen Juden in der deutschen Provinz 1919 bis 1939* (Hamburg, 2007).

⁵⁸ Michael Wildt, *Generation des Unbedingten: Das Führungskorps des Reichssicherheitshauptamtes* (Hamburg, 2002).

⁵⁹ See also Nancy Scheper-Hughes, "Coming to Our Senses: Anthropology and Genocide," in Alexander Laban Hinton, ed., *Annihilating Difference: The Anthropology of Genocide* (Berkeley, Calif., 2002), 348–381.

state is weakened by the fact that recent work has shown that all modern genocides have relied on bureaucracy.⁶⁰ The basic ability of a central bureaucracy to communicate and delegate looks rather more removed from any kind of defining explanation for genocide when the little local township offices of the Rwandan context will do as well. It suggests that what is really at stake in the Nazi case is once again our disenchantment that highly educated bureaucrats, often in organizations of well-established pedigree, could nevertheless be deployed to such horrific ends. That is a different proposition from the claim that such bureaucracy was the decisive enabler.⁶¹

OF COURSE, IT IS POSSIBLE TO make claims about Nazism's modernity that leave greater space for sentiment and for irrationality. Indeed, as both Frederic Jameson and Frederick Cooper have pointed out, for many contemporary observers of the *fin-de-siècle* and interwar periods, modernity's distinctive characteristic was not its rationality, and what was seen as modern was the polar opposite of cold reason.⁶² Modernity was "speed, shock and the spectacle of constant sensation."⁶³ In the 1920s, to be modern often meant eschewing reason in the name of the future, seeking a deeper truth than the flat mandate of orderly thought.⁶⁴ The aim of recent work presenting the Nazis not as modernizers but as "modernists" has been to capture the ways in which Nazism drew on such powerful sentiments and sensibilities.⁶⁵ According to both Peter Fritzsche and Roger Griffin, the Nazis shared with other modernist movements a commitment to radical renewal and the rooting out of decadence. Nazi utopianism, Griffin argues, allowed for "dynamically changing, kaleidoscopic combinations of past with future," mythic with "scientistic," "archaism with technicism."⁶⁶ In effect, the story is very similar to Jeffrey Herf's tale of "reactionary modernism," except that for Griffin the qualifying adjective is inappropriate because it rests on the false assumption that authentic modernism is of necessity socially progressive.⁶⁷

The Nazis' metaphysical revolt against the constraints of civilization and their claim to be at the forefront of a new time is certainly reminiscent of other modernist manifestos (although the standard of inhumanity they actually set was unrivaled). Yet what does it really mean to call them modernists? First, we should be clear that to be "modernist" was quite distinct both from subjectively embracing the "modern" and from pursuing modernization. Modernism arguably bore some relation to mo-

⁶⁰ Donald Bloxham, "Organized Mass Murder: Structure, Participation, and Motivation in Comparative Perspective," *Holocaust and Genocide Studies* 22, no. 2 (2008): 203–245.

⁶¹ See also Shaw, "Sociology and Genocide."

⁶² Frederic Jameson, "Foreword," in Jean-François Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge* (Minneapolis, 1984), xviii; Cooper, *Colonialism in Question*, 123. I am indebted to Donald Bloxham for the insight that Arnold Toynbee saw the 1870s as the beginning of postmodernity because of the retreat from modern rationality. Arnold Joseph Toynbee, *A Study of History* (London, 1934).

⁶³ Harry Harootunian, *Overcome by Modernity: History, Culture, and Community in Interwar Japan* (Princeton, N.J., 2000), 18.

⁶⁴ Winks and Neuberger, *Europe and the Making of Modernity*, 309–310.

⁶⁵ Fritzsche, "Nazi Modern," 10.

⁶⁶ Griffin, *Modernism and Fascism*, 270, 332.

⁶⁷ Herf, *Reactionary Modernism*.

dernity (or at least a temporally localized version of it), in the sense that it had been the shock of the new in the latter part of the nineteenth century that had helped give rise to it. Yet to be modernist often meant to reject much that was then modern.⁶⁸ That was certainly true of Hitler; modernity, indeed, was not a regular term in his vocabulary. Hitler's Darwinistic account of races and struggles was no modernization narrative, much as he recognized the potent threat represented by the United States.⁶⁹ Moreover, the Nazis were modernists in only a particular, limited sense. Hitler was no friend of much of the modernist aesthetic; far more than under Italian fascism, artistic modernism's place in the Third Reich would remain complex and contested.⁷⁰ Nor did the Nazis embrace the dictates of technology with the enthusiasm of radical technical modernists such as Ernst Jünger.⁷¹ So what made Nazis modernists, if that is what they were (it was not a term they themselves used), is less any particular kind of solution or direction to their policies than a radical style. Looking at the transformation of German politics after World War I, however, we may well wonder whether their style and outlook was not the product of a narrower interwar conjuncture.

FOR THE FRANKFURT SCHOOL, including Zygmunt Bauman, modernity begins somewhere around the Enlightenment, and its defining characteristic is the imposition of order on society—the ultimate expression of which can be seen in Nazi racial engineering.⁷² For Roger Griffin, among many scholars, however, the focus is more narrowly on what has been dubbed “high modernity”—on the shock of the new and the search for new political and cultural forms in a mass political environment in the last quarter of the nineteenth and the beginning of the twentieth century. Thus, more narrowly defined, it is easier to see Nazism as a product of high modernity.⁷³

Or is it? Consider the many characteristics of the interwar period that were so crucial for Nazism's character, aims, and resonance. Some of these characteristics radically heightened features of the foregoing epoch, some of them actually reversed previous trends, and some were without precedent. The first, and in many ways the author of the others, was the First World War, including the defeat and the postwar settlement. The war's legacies in the international and domestic sphere affected the whole globe, but hit Germany as nowhere else. The experience of mechanized murder unleashed a cultural shock that provided a profoundly new resource for interpretation in the interwar period (though one malleable enough to be plied into very different shapes—some pacifist, some martial). In the course of the 1920s, the juxtaposition of the new experience of total war, on the one hand, with a decidedly un-total resolution to the global balance of power, on the other, created a specific

⁶⁸ On modernists' equation of modernity and decadence, see Griffin, *Modernism and Fascism*, 49–54.

⁶⁹ Tooze, *The Wages of Destruction*, 9–12.

⁷⁰ Ulrich Schmid, “Style versus Ideology: Towards a Conceptualisation of Fascist Aesthetics,” *Totalitarian Movements and Political Religions* 6, no. 1 (2005): 127–140.

⁷¹ Thomas Rohrkämper, “Antimodernism, Reactionary Modernism and National Socialism: Technocratic Tendencies in Germany, 1890–1945,” *Contemporary European History* 8, no. 1 (1999): 48–49.

⁷² Horkheimer and Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*.

⁷³ Ulrich Herbert, “Europe in High Modernity: Reflections on a Theory of the 20th Century,” *Journal of Modern European History* 5, no. 1 (2007): 5–20.

context within which German, Japanese, and other military elites thought about preparing for the next war. The strains that all the participating societies had experienced during the war, and the collapses and civil wars in its aftermath, suggested that creating a new kind of internal unity would be essential to winning the next conflict. The war's global nature, particularly American and colonial involvement in Europe's war, suggested also that the next conflict would be truly world-shaping. Apocalyptic visions surfaced in the notebooks of Ishiwara Kanji and Ernst Jünger, and not just in Hitler's "struggle."⁷⁴

The new paramilitary political style that smashed through the elegant plate glass of an older *Honoratiorenpolitik* in the 1920s was as much the product of the second transformative event that left its mark on the period, namely the Russian Revolution, and the chain of smaller revolutions that broke out in Central and Eastern Europe in its wake. The revolution, and Russia's lurking presence as the external embodiment of potential domestic revolt, created an overlay of external and internal threat that had not existed since the Napoleonic wars, perhaps not since the Thirty Years' War. As Andreas Wirsching has shown for both Berlin and Paris in the interwar period, every aspect of fascist politics was shaped by its confrontation with the radical left.⁷⁵ A third decisive feature of the interwar period was economic. Partly by dint of the war, partly by dint of the admittedly preexisting pressures for protectionism, the interwar period saw a major disruption to longer-term growth trends in international trade. Labor migration was hugely constrained, most notably because of new immigration laws in the U.S. The slump radically accelerated this trend, creating a world of limited bilateral exchange and closed borders. For many thinkers in a colony-deprived Germany, a captive hinterland, as grain reserve and market, seemed essential, particularly as they looked to the growing power of the U.S. Even the most export-oriented branches of German business lost their faith in the world economy.⁷⁶ By the mid-1930s, certainly, this pessimism was beginning to fade, and if Hitler had not been gearing the economy up for war, there undoubtedly would have been a slide back toward greater international engagement. But the mercantilist climate of the interwar years was nevertheless crucial in shaping Hitler's world view, and that of the elites who backed the party.⁷⁷

By unleashing the war, the Nazis dragged Germany to the brink of destruction and exposed it to decades of division. They brought the United States back into Europe and facilitated a division of the world into U.S. and Soviet spheres. The war made the other powers economically dependent on the U.S. and thus gave America the ability to shape the postwar economic system. The hydrogen bomb rendered interwar military thinking obsolete. The militarization of politics in European capitals was replaced by its economization under the umbrella of U.S. nuclear power and the U.S. military industrial complex. Nazism also undermined many of the ideas

⁷⁴ Mark R. Peattie, *Ishiwara Kanji and Japan's Confrontation with the West* (Princeton, N.J., 1975); Ernst Jünger, *Der Arbeiter* (Hamburg, 1932).

⁷⁵ Andreas Wirsching, *Vom Weltkrieg zum Bürgerkrieg? Politischer Extremismus in Deutschland und Frankreich, 1918–1933/39—Berlin und Paris im Vergleich* (Munich, 1999).

⁷⁶ Volker R. Berghahn, *Unternehmer und Politik in der Bundesrepublik* (Frankfurt am Main, 1985), 29–35.

⁷⁷ Although, as Adam Tooze notes, the objective realities of the economy did not suffice to explain the kinds of risks that Hitler was willing to take in order to create an empire to rival the U.S. Tooze, *The Wages of Destruction*, xxv.

with which it had become associated, setting a slow fuse burning underneath the concepts of race and antisemitism, and instantly depriving eugenics of respectability.⁷⁸ The Christian churches moved toward the explicit rejection of antisemitism (even if anti-communism remained an important source of continuity for a while).⁷⁹ The biopolitics of “modernity” would now look very different. Thus the Nazi disaster transformed flows of power, wealth, and ideas in the post–World War II period.

These few brief remarks on the interwar period of course barely scratch the surface.⁸⁰ But they serve to remind us of the distinctiveness of different eras within the modern world. They also show how decisive the international context was in shaping the Nazi project. The balance of power, the sense of external threats, the opportunities for enrichment, but also the flow of ideas across borders were crucial. This may well always be the case—and it certainly was when World War I had made so many peoples and parties so conscious of the global character of alliances and power. The increased interdependence of nations is, of course, a central feature of modernity. As Chris Bayly has reminded us, the nation’s most central and crucial characteristic was not the organization of power at home, but the fact that it found itself cheek by jowl with other nations.⁸¹ While capitalist development, intellectual and religious movements, and evolving views about the international system might create certain kinds of uniformity, the international sphere remained in the interwar period in many senses unregulated and thus contingent. This contingency may be one reason why so many attempts to prove Nazism’s modernity, and indeed so many theories of modernization, pay the international context so little heed.

A growing number of historians have sought to acknowledge such diversity and contingency while rescuing the underlying idea of modernity by talking of “modernities” in the plural. Yet as Frederick Cooper has pointed out, this merely buries the problem.⁸² The “family resemblance” between “modernities” is often not clear enough to justify the term (and, we might add, its distinction from the premodern period is rarely defined tightly enough to be meaningful).⁸³ Nazism certainly showed what a modern society could do. Our resulting disenchantment with the trappings of advanced industrial societies has been profound and enduring, and has caused us to rethink concepts such as progress, civilization, and modernization. But the effort to link National Socialism to pervasive or generic elements of modernity has shown not only the peculiarities of that strange and awful dictatorship, but also the fatal

⁷⁸ See above and fn. 19. On the secrecy surrounding Nazi eugenics after the war, see Burleigh, *Death and Deliverance*, 291–292.

⁷⁹ Geoffrey Wigoder, *Jewish-Christian Relations since World War II* (Manchester, 1988).

⁸⁰ Just to make the obvious point, this is not to claim that Nazism is explicable solely in the context of the interwar period. There are many concentric or overlapping circles of explanation and connection, some of which tie Nazism to other movements in the twentieth century, some to roots in the high modern period, and some, indeed, to the whole of the period of what we call modernity.

⁸¹ C. A. Bayly, *The Birth of the Modern World, 1780–1914: Global Connections and Comparisons* (Malden, Mass., 2004).

⁸² Cooper, “Modernity,” 127.

⁸³ See the use of the concept of family resemblance in relation to modernity in Michael L. Satlow, “Defining Judaism: Accounting for ‘Religions’ in the Study of Religion,” *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 74, no. 4 (2006): 837–860; and the discussion in Steinberg, *Judaism Musical and Unmusical*, 6.

limitations of modernity as a concept with which to explain change in the modern world.⁸⁴

⁸⁴ I particularly welcome recent efforts to place Nazism and the Holocaust in their epochal context, most notably Bloxham, *The Final Solution*.

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